Ethics For Modern Christians, Part III
How to be a Disciple Without Being Religious
Luke 10:25-37
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Several years ago a Broadway Musical with the engaging title, How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying, parodied the way American corporate structures sometimes reward a person for skills and abilities which have very little to do with the real business of the corporation.

Finch, you will remember, advances up the ladder on the basis of luck, charm and endless self-confidence. One of the best - and most significant moments in the play occurs when in the Executive Washroom, he looks at his own image in the mirror and breaks into the show-stopper, "I Believe in You".

A few years later a Methodist clergyman, Charles Merrill Smith, wrote a little book, How to Become a Bishop Without Being Religious, which poked fun at the syndrome in the institutional church. Even Presbyterians, who have no bishops, knew nevertheless, what he was talking about.

I should like to add to that impressive library this morning with a contribution under the title How to Be a Disciple Without Being Religious, sans music, of course. That is, I believe, the point of the most famous story Jesus ever told - the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

The setting in St. Luke's Gospel is every bit as significant as the story itself. One day a lawyer came to Jesus to discuss theology. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Lawyer means "Scribe", a man whose job it was to know and interpret the law: the Holy Law of Judaism which contained 613 separate rules and regulations for every conceivable human situation. If one of those 613 rules did not apply directly; if there was some question regarding appropriate behavior, a Scribe interpreted the law. The law described how to be religious: it defined morality. More than that, the Law itself was regarded as good. To disobey the law was sinful. To disregard the law's prescriptions for correct behavior was equally sinful. When the Gospels refer to "sinners", more often than not the people involved are not notorious evildoers, but poor folk who simply didn't care about the law.

The man who asked the question about inheriting eternal life knew the law. He knew that the answer to his questions was the watershed of Judaism as a formal religion. We conclude, therefore, that his purpose probably was to set a rhetorical trap. In the name of religion, he hoped to entangle and indict, in the court of public opinion, one who, more and more, was looking like an enemy of established morality.

Jesus was such a master at this kind of thing. "What do the scriptures say? How do you read it?" The answer was simple: the lawyer knew the book: "You must love God with heart, mind, soul, strength and your neighbor as yourself." "Good," said Jesus, "Go and do it."

See how the lawyer, who had come to discuss theology and in the process trap Jesus in some heretical liberalism, found himself on the defensive. Members of his profession today have to admire the subtlety of his next maneuver: he asked another question, "But who is my neighbor?" Perhaps he thought he could precipitate a theoretical discourse on the definition of neighbor: perhaps he was still holding

out for the possibility that Jesus would indict Himself in His own response. In any event, he shouldn't have asked that question because it gave Jesus the opportunity to tell a story. In the story the original question, "Who is My Neighbor?" is turned around and re-phrased" "To Whom am I a Neighbor?" At the end Jesus has moved from academic speculation to morality: from abstract theology - "How do I inherit life?" to a rather specific and radical ethic. It was a prescription for being a disciple without being religious.

You know that beloved story. A man on the notoriously dangerous road from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked, beaten, robbed and left to die in the ditch. Two religious types, a Priest and Levite, passed by. A Samaritan, regarded by purists as a racial half-breed, and by the orthodox as a religious heretic, stopped, bound up the man's wounds, transported him to an inn and arranged for his care.

It doesn't require great scholarship to understand that. It says, rather clearly I think, that following Jesus Christ is something different from and more than, obeying the rules of common decency and orderliness. The Priest and the Levite, a minor Temple Functionary, were not bad men. They did no wrong. They broke no law. Everyone here has done the same thing, perhaps with regularity. These two men simply made a wide circle around the man lying in the ditch and proceded with their journey. Some New Testament scholars speculate that they were on religious business, and that the law prohibited their coming in contact with someone who might be unclean. The poor man in the ditch was naked. They couldn't even tell if he was a Jew. One thing is certain: the law did not prescribe what to do when one stumbles over an unidentified, half-dead robbery victim lying beside the road. No law can. Their neat religious system did not deal with the matter of meeting immediate human need in somewhat unusual circumstances.

That is first: if we are, in fact, interested in following Jesus Christ, which is to say, in being disciples, we must be prepared to be guided by something other than the standard and accepted rules of good conduct in our culture. That is not to say that the common morality is unnecessary or irrelevant. It is simply to acknowledge that common standards of right behavior are not enough. It is to allow that while religious rules may define what it means to be religious, discipleship - according to Jesus of Nazareth - is something different.

Beginning in the New Testament, extending throughout the whole two thousand year course of Christian history and emerging again in our day, there is a tension between a legalistic approach to morality and the way of Jesus Christ. His ministry was punctuated by the conflict with representatives of legalistic religion. He told His followers that their goodness would have to exceed the goodness of the Scribes and Pharisees: i.e. the goodness which resulted from obeying the rules. Jewish Christians insisted that Gentile converts to the Gospel must adhere to the moral and ceremonial and dietary laws of Judaism. Out of that First Century conflict came St. Paul's discourses on law and freedom which in his letter to the Galatians reach a kind of pinnacle called the Magna Charta of Christian Freedom. But that did not resolve the issue. The Christian Church down across the centuries has consistently opted for the law as the safest and simplest way to nurture right behavior. "Do this and that - don't do this nor that." In an article on the Ambiguity of Biblical Religion, in the January issue of Theology Today, the Roman Catholic scholar, Gregory Baum, writes, "The roots of legalism are situated in the human psyche: for the legalist mentality is even found in people who have little to do with religion. Unfortunately, religion readily lends itself to a legalist misunderstanding." (p.349).

The trouble is that when legalism and religion join hands in order to define morality the way of Jesus inevitably gets swept under the carpet. But He won't allow it. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan He made abundantly clear that His new ethic was above and beyond law and that, furthermore, a person has to move above the law even to begin understanding what it means to follow Him as a disciple.

His ethic is defined by the Samaritan and contrasted with the legal correctness of the Priest and Levite. It is an ethic of outgoing, extravagant, spontaneous, loving action. It is an ethic courageous enough to leave legal requirements behind and take risks. It is an ethic spontaneous enough to stop by the road without thumbing through the rule book to discover what in the world to do next.

It is an ethic of active love which begins with the ability to identify with another person: to see, really, the other as a child of God with specific and painfully particular needs. Helmut Thielicke writes; "Love not only looks for resources to help - it lets us see the misery of our fellow man. Before love sets our hands in motion it opens our eyes." (How to Believe Again, p.123).

I think that is very much to the point. The sin of the Priest and Levite was one of omission. They didn't even see - I mean really see - the man in the ditch. Oh, they probably felt a twinge of compassion or guilt. They probably made a mental note to get in touch with the authorities about conditions along the Jericho road. They may even have organized a Task Force to study the problem and provide input to the City Council. Those jobs need doing also. But the person is still bleeding to death beside the road and there is something essential to following Jesus Christ about breaking through all the red tape, all the institutional systems, and binding up his wounds.

That's relevant. We are a people who care. Our society generates an abundance of structures and institutions for the purpose of expressing our concern. But sometimes, I sense, institutional charity walks right by the miserable victims lying in the ditch. That, by the way, is what is so necessary about the location and ministries of this particular Church. It is terribly easy in our society to "care at a distance": to serve on a Board of Directors, or write a check and let it go at that. But here we see them: not the social problem in the abstract, or the object of a planning chart, but human beings who live and breathe and have feelings and hopes, although not very many.

The ethic of Jesus insists that we open our eyes and see another human being: walking down Broad Street in sub-zero weather with no gloves, no socks, no food and nowhere even to sit down: or sitting at a desk in the office next to us, dying of loneliness: or across the street, looking for all the world like an example of Better Homes and Gardens ideal American family but living in despair because communication doesn't happen anymore: or in the intimacy of a marriage gone stale, where all the rituals are played to the hilt but a husband and wife have stopped seeing each other as persons with needs and hurts and hopes.

The ethic of Jesus is one of spontaneous love which begins with the cultivated ability to see. The person courageous enough to try it may not look very religious in his or her efforts. That is the point of Jesus' Parable. He wants disciples whose highest moral imperative is not the following of someone's rules but the need of another person.

So far so good. But what about the Church? It's one thing to advocate a radical new ethic for individual Christians. The going gets considerably rougher when we suggest that the Church, as a corporate entity, ought to practice this ethic. It's one thing for the Church to urge people to behave in a certain way in the interest of following Jesus Christ as individuals. It is an altogether different matter to give the Church as Church identity and look to it for corporate testimony. The particularity of Presbyterianism is in this insistance, namely, that the Church is under the same ethical imperative as individual Christians: that it is the particular beauty of the Church that it has the equipment and strength to follow Jesus Christ in ways the individual cannot.

The controversy surrounding Presbyterian mission activity in recent years is precisely at this point. It has been made infinitely more painful for Presbyterians by the revival of a kind of religiosity that does not and will not share the dignity of an honest theology of the Church. There is tremendous appeal in a religious ethic that focuses on individual behavior and piety and assumes naively that corporate, social evil will be defeated by lone individuals bringing their convictions to bear in the public arena. It is a relief, frankly, to be excused from corporate responsibility for the establishment of the Kingdom of God.

The danger in making a commitment together to follow Jesus Christ is that we may not always agree regarding our strategy: knowing Presbyterians as I do, we will not often agree. We will not always be of one mind about the Church's responsibility vis a vis hunger, poverty, justice in the world. I have not always agreed with the stances and programs of the United Presbyterian Church. But I thank God that it has remained, through the conflict and turmoil of the 60's and 70's, the kind of Church that will take risks and be vulnerable as it seeks faithfully to follow Jesus Christ. We may and will continue to disagree about particular strategies. One thing we cannot do, and that is to ask our Church to stop acting like a church and leave us to work out our own individual ethical stances. That Presbyterians can never do.

The United Presbyterian Church is engaged in a great effort to renew itself in mission called the Major Mission Fund. You have heard much about it. Some of you have made your commitments: others will be telephoned today and in the days following. It is not my purpose this morning to repeat what has been said already. You share my conviction, I trust, that the world needs a church that is strong and brave and faithful. You know the extent of the need.

I would rather put the entire matter of your response to the Major Mission Fund in the context of the ethic of Jesus Christ, an Ethic for Modern Christians. I would rather invite you to consider the people who will be helped and healed in the context of the story about a man who knew what Jesus meant by loving your neighbor.

And then I would ask you to put the whole matter in the context of that question with which the lawyer began: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" It is the question. Everyone asks it sooner or later. What can I do to live - really live? What is the secret to a life that is worth living, a life full of zest and vitality, a life fresh with excitement and purpose?

"Teacher," we ask, "what shall I do to overcome boredom? How can I escape this deadly staleness? What is the prescription for finding something authentic in the midst of a culture which works so hard to convince us that real life is using the right deodorant, serving the right wine, driving the right automobile and getting 7½% on our investments?" The revival of fundamentalist religion is the evidence

that young people are asking the question as never before! Sect groups with strange sounding names provide an answer - "give your life: dedicate yourself to something: open your heart: love something enough to die for it and you'll suddenly find out what your own life is all about." How terribly sad that the staid institutional Church has allowed the Moonies, the Children of God, the traveling evangelists to say that in the face of our own thunderous silence. How sad that we have hidden the excitement of the ethic of Jesus behind the facade of religious rules and rituals.

Gerhardt Nebel suggests somewhere that much neurosis is simply the product of asking the same question as the lawyer about life, not finding an answer, and then descending into a cycle of introspection and brooding. Victor Frankl, Austrian psychiatrist, has written a new book The Unconscious God in which he identifies "the existential vacuum" as the dominant motif in the Western World. Frankl employs the over-used term "meaninglessness" to define it and concludes that the only way out is to find something or someone about whom we care enough to love and give of ourselves freely.

Can it be that salvation is as close as the person who needs us? Can it be that wholeness is as near as someone else's hurt? It may come as somehwat of a surprise, but that is what Jesus said.

"Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Who isn't hungry for an answer to that question? Who isn't weary of the inadequate, half-baked schemes of the peace-of-mind merchants? Who wouldn't give anything for life - real life - now? It is not a matter of obeying more rules, saying more prayers, singing more hymns. It is, rather, a matter of opening our eyes to the needs of others and then doing something about them; something loving and lovely, something sacrificial and generous, something giving and therefore deeply satisfying.

When Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan He was paraphrasing the Gospel. It doesn't take much interpolation to see us - you and me - as the ones in need. He is the one who has come and keeps coming to the roadside. He is the one who has come to live our lives, to feel our pain, to laugh and cry with us, to stand with us in suffering and to die our death. He is the Good News that God loves and cares about us: that we are worthy - in His eyes - of the most extravagant love.

Because God is like that, we are called to be like that for others. It is a radically new ethic of discipleship, and to participate, to live it, to know oneself loved and to love others - is to usher in a little bit of God's Kingdom on earth. It is to know the answer to the question, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Amen.

Father, forgive us our wide circles around human need. Forgive us for neglecting to see and care for those closest to us. Inspire us to love - and give, in the spirit of Him who loved us and gave Himself for us: even Jesus Christ.

Amen.